

Silver Spoons, Mad Baboons, and Tea at Fortnum & Mason

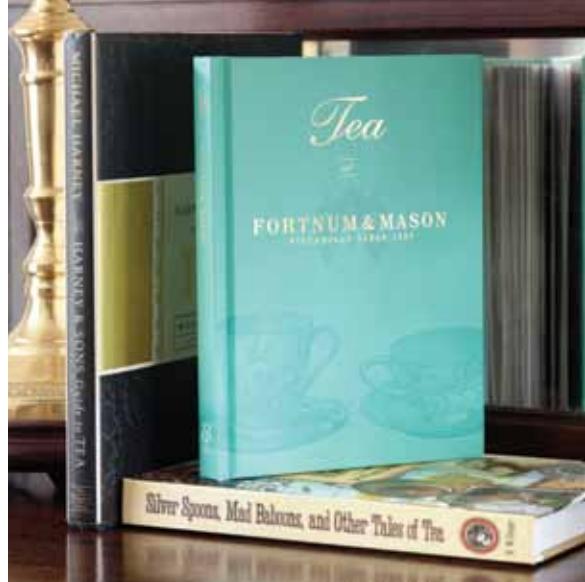
By James Norwood Pratt / Photo by Sarah Swihart

Tea at Fortnum & Mason recently arrived in the mail, and I put it on the shelf alongside other “company” books like *Harrods World of Tea* and *Mariage Frères’ The Little Book of Tea*. These books are worthy efforts at celebrating famous companies and brim with scrumptious photographs. Fortnum & Mason’s offers 45 full-color pages, an elegant pictorial guide to choice delectables that accompany traditional British afternoon tea, and at least that many recipes and tea pairings for them. One glance at, say, *Stilton and Fig Tart with Walnut Dressing* is enough to make one renew vows of pilgrimage to Piccadilly to enjoy it at Fortnum & Mason’s famous tearoom there. Some of these recipes could intimidate even experienced cooks, it seems to me (I don’t cook, and for some things there is no remedy), but the eye and the imagination will be well nourished.

From 2005, *Harrods World of Tea* is also filled with photos—but of tea, not food. Yet the text is full of wildly inaccurate information about tea. How did Harrods’ famous tea buyer, Hafizur Rahman, ever allow such a thing to happen?

And just glance through *The Little Book of Tea* from that equally famous company *Mariage Frères* of Paris. It is a sumptuous feast for the eyes, not surprisingly, since the art and photography were destined for the company’s magnum opus *French Tea*, published by Flammarion in 2003. The exquisite taste and flawless beauty of such illustrations are the book’s chief excuse for being, and they suffice. Churlish as it must sound to reproach French writers for inaccuracies about tea matters, one still wishes that *Mariage Frères*, like Harrods, were less cavalier about rubbishing truth and historical fact. But books like theirs, despite all, do spread the love and lore of tea, and this year’s customers who can afford the £42 (US\$67.29) per person for tea at Fortnum & Mason’s Diamond Jubilee Tea Salon in Piccadilly will hardly notice the £10 (US\$16) cost of a Fortnum & Mason keepsake book.

Of company books conscientiously dedicated to enlarging our appreciation and understanding of tea, let me mention two of the best. *A Green Tea Notebook* is a succinct illustrated guide to Japan’s teas available from The Green Teaist company of Lake Forest, Illinois, and Beverly Hills, California. *The Great Teas of China* by Roy Fong does the same job



for Chinese teas from San Francisco’s famous Imperial Tea Court. The photographs in these two books may be more functional than artistic, but the main difference from the others is that Roy Fong and The Green Teaist know what they’re talking about and want us to understand it, too. The same might also be said of *TeaGschwendner’s Book of Tea*.

After going through my shelf of company books, I removed *The Harney & Sons Guide to Tea* by Michael Harney and placed it on a higher level entirely. What I judge a book by, company or not, is not particularized knowledge but a total harvest of thinking, feeling, loving, and closely observing our human responses. In ambition, as well as truly sustained attention, Michael’s work outranks any other company book I know. It is such a brilliant contribution to the enjoyment of tea—the best comparison would be with Len Evans’s classic *How to Taste Wine*.

Decidedly not a company book is *Silver Spoons, Mad Baboons, and Other Tales of Tea* by Barry W. Cooper, as a longtime Lipton chieftain among the foremost company men of our time. After growing up the son of a British army intelligence officer in Kenya and Malaysia, Barry apprenticed as a tea taster for Lipton in London and launched what has become a 40-some-year career spanning all the centers of the tea industry. Now full of honors and inseparable from tea folklore and history, Barry is not only a larger-than-life figure but also an absolutely first-rate narrator of his sometimes hair-raising adventures around the world. His pages lay bare the inside of the tea industry he knew, but mainly they carry us through one hilarious yarn after another and secrete little pearls of wisdom, perhaps, in the reader. Few women—and no man—can fail to enjoy Barry’s tea stories. If you love a man who doesn’t share your love of tea, give him this book and just wait.

.....
EDITOR’S NOTE: For ordering information about each of the books mentioned, please turn to Resources for Readers on page 64.

Having served the cause of tea around the world for three decades, James Norwood Pratt is a highly regarded teacher and speaker and a recognized authority on tea and tea lore. His eponymous Tea Dictionary was published in 2010. He and his wife, Valerie, live in San Francisco.